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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8486
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000257

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY)
INFO SCA/PPD (VAN DE VATE), IIP/G/NEA-SA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO PREL TX](#)

SUBJECT: POST OUTREACH IN TURKMENISTAN'S UNCERTAIN JANUARY

REFERENCE A: ASHGABAT 00059

REFERENCE B: ASHGABAT 00168

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Post outreach in January 2007 took place in an atmosphere of uncertainty because of the recent death of President Saparmurat Niyazov. In addition to regular post programming and post's annual Alumni Reunion, post hosted a number of official visits by U.S. Government officials, including Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Evan Feigenbaum, post's Information Resources Officer Mary Nell Bryant, and an interagency assistance delegation -- nearly all of whom took part in post outreach activities [reftels A,B]. End Summary.

Information Resources Officer Meets with Alumni, Government

¶2. (U) Regional Information Resource Officer Mary Nell Bryant jump-started talks between the assistance delegation and the Ministry of Culture with her January 23 presentation on library partnerships at the National Library. In the first meeting between post and the library's new director, Bryant introduced 20 Library staff to the potential of bi-national and community level library partnerships to help develop libraries as knowledge as well as community centers. Using locally relevant examples, Bryant showed how libraries can partner with health organizations, businesses, museums and media to expand their services and broaden their reach; she also suggested suitable U.S. libraries for partnership with Turkmenistan. The National Librarian spoke on the background and collections of the library and its plans for relocation to the huge new National Cultural Center. IRC Assistant Azat Myradov presented the Library with a collection of materials from the American Library Association's Story Lines America program. The Library staff's follow up questions revealed an enthusiastic interest in Bryant's ideas. The PAO offered technical cooperation in Internet training (the new Center is slated to have 118 public access terminals), and encouraged the Director to think about possible future International Visitor Leadership Programs for herself or Library staff. The event helped strengthen the existing ties with the National Library, at a key time of government transition in Turkmenistan, and provided several leads for follow up contact with the new Cultural Center.

¶4. (U) During her visit to Turkmenistan, Bryant also visited the Mary and Turkmenabat American Corners. In Turkmenabat, the site of ongoing and significant harassment of Corner patrons and staff by local authorities, Bryant and Public Affairs Officer Andrew Paul met with the Head of the Lebap Region Education Department and two representatives of the Lebap Region governor's office in order to encourage a new cooperative relationship between the American Corner and local government, much as the U.S. policy has looked at "turning the page" in its relationship with Turkmenistan as a whole.

¶5. (U) Bryant used her experiences at the Corners to develop her presentation at the U.S. Government-sponsored Alumni Reunion held

27-28 January in Ashgabat (septel). There she gave a presentation to over 100 alumni on how to use the Information Resources Center and the American Corners to conduct research for alumni programming and grants development, and to help alumni achieve academic and professional development goals. Many Reunion participants did not know the extent of the services available through the American Corners -- because post cannot advertise freely in Turkmenistan. This Reunion, which has become almost an annual event in Turkmenistan, emphasized the value of peer mentoring and community initiatives, while still revisiting such goals as the registration of a national alumni association.

"Warm Springs" Engages Local Youth on Politics, Religion, and the Power of Will

¶6. (U) "Without legs he was able to stand up for his country," commented one of the 13 viewers of the documentary "Warm Springs," screened at the Public Affairs Section on January 30. In a post-film discussion moderated by English Language Fellow John Mark King, viewers highlighted Roosevelt's physical and spiritual endurance and faith in himself. The film also spurred participants to reflect on Turkmenistan's first ever multi-candidate presidential election campaign (the election occurred February 11) as well as presidential elections in the United States. One viewer noted that Roosevelt's comment, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," reminded him of the Prophet Mohammed's teaching that fear was the enemy. Post's movie afternoons at the Public Affairs Section -- of which there are up to 10 each month -- provide a consistent and non-threatening atmosphere for discussions considered too risqué for most public venues.

Turkmenistan FLEX Alumni Mark Martin Luther King Day

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¶7. (U) Recent FLEX Alumni in Turkmenbashi and Mary held events to commemorate Martin Luther King Day on January 15. Twenty Mary American Corner visitors came to hear a presentation on the Civil Rights Movement and participate in a discussion about the Movement and about the life of Dr. King. The FLEX alumna organizing the event also read aloud Dr. King's "I have a Dream" speech, with participants reading along, in English, on handouts. A Turkmenbashi FLEX alumna presented the history behind Martin Luther King day to seven local youth at the city's polyclinic, where many of the American Corner activities have been taking place. Her presentation focused on the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott and other social action campaigns that defined the Civil Rights Movement. FLEX alumni regularly give presentations at the American Corners to commemorate U.S. holidays and national figures, which serve as a historical-cultural lesson for local youth but also give the alumni and their peers a chance to practice their English.

Mary American Corner Hosts Gender, U.S. Politics Discussions

¶8. (U) On January 19, three Mary FLEX alumni hosted a seminar on "Women's Roles in Turkmenistan," for 27 visitors to the American Corner. The seminar began with a review of historically significant Turkmen women and continued with a discussion on gender issues in Turkmenistan. Alumni described how their attitudes toward gender issues changed after living in the United States, and how differently gender is perceived in America. One of the alumni involved in organizing the seminar also holds a regular U.S. Government class at the Corner, where he incorporated discussion from the seminar. The alumnus typically researches a topic of U.S. Government prior to the class, makes handouts on the topic and then leads a class and discussion. On January 24 the alumnus focused on the U.S. legislative process, and explained the concept of "checks and balances." Participants later discussed differences in the government structure of the United States and Turkmenistan.

Turkmenabat Youth Debate Hard Versus Soft Sciences

¶9. (U) On January 16, Turkmenabat Alumni Assistant Sabina Hojakuliyeva (FLEX '05) organized a debate club for 14 American Corner visitors. After receiving information about debates and the rules of the club, the participants were divided into two teams and asked to prepare the topic, "It is more important for students to study history and literature than it is for them to study science and mathematics." After the conclusion of the debate the teams' performances were discussed and the winning team was recognized. Result: As a result of this activity, students had a chance to develop their critical thinking, teamwork, public speaking, and English language skills.

Lebap Geography and Current Events Classes Fill a Void

¶10. (U) FLEX Alumni and two American Corner volunteers conducted their regular Geography and Current Events classes at the Turkmenabat American Corner, each of which draws about 10 local youth per session. During the January 22 Geography class, the alumni led the participants in a trivia contest about world geography, which tested on such questions as the biggest countries, the highest population, the longest rivers, and the highest mountains. The alumni then showcased one country -- Finland this time -- discussing its topography, population and a number of notable geographic and demographic features. The January 23 Current Events class began with clips from BBC and Euronews (in English) played on the television at the American Corner. Participants discussed the news they had just watched: terrorist acts in Israel, protests in the Czech Republic, and climate change. Both the Current Events and Geography classes provide education not available in state schools. The alumni and volunteers who organize the classes develop their leadership and English language skills while their "students" learn how to listen, debate and use the resources of the American Corners.

English Language Fellow Conducts Online Lesson Plan Training

¶11. (U) On January 29, nearly 20 secondary school teachers from Ashgabat, Dashoguz, Mary, and Turkmenabat participated in a live online workshop led by post's English Language Fellow, John Mark King, on how to write and use effective language presentation dialogues. Teachers throughout the country and King have already posted 75 messages on the theme at Turkmenistan's Educational Portal (<http://gcetm.net>). King explained in the forum how to tailor the dialogues used in teacher's manuals and textbooks for local students, and stressed the value of simplicity and repetition in English instruction. King finished the 90-minute live session by asking teachers/students to create their own dialogues and he directed participants to materials for further study. King will

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continue to lead the forum in a non-live format for English teachers throughout Turkmenistan.

English Language Fellow Trains New ACCESS Program Teachers

¶12. (U) In mid-January, King held a teacher training workshop for the nine teachers involved in Turkmenistan's ACCESS English Microscholarships Program, a two-year English language scholarship for underprivileged youth in countries with large Muslim populations. The primary source of materials for training were five modules selected from the Office of English Language Programs' new teacher training course, Shaping the Way We Teach English: Successful Practices Around the World. King implemented the following from the course: Critical and Creative Thinking, Integrating Skills, Pair/Group Work, Authentic Materials and Contextualizing Language; King had modified the first two lessons to better suit local conditions. The workshop also addressed the program's extracurricular component: participants planned out-of-classroom activities that could be accomplished near the location of instruction and with limited materials. King and the teachers also discussed sources of additional assistance, including Peace Corps volunteers, the local American Corners and each other. The Public Affairs Section, through the English Language Fellow,

remains the focal point of assistance and support for the ACCESS teachers, with the American Corners serving as the students' "second home" for programming.

Students from Turkmenistan Join U.S., Uzbek Students in Online HIV/AIDS Forum

¶13. (U) Over 25 secondary school students from Ashgabat, Dashoguz, Mary, and Turkmenabat, Turkmenistan concluded a three-week online project with U.S. (Amherst, Massachusetts) and Uzbek partners at the Global Connections and Exchange (GCE)-Uzbekistan portal in a live forum on January 17 (<http://www.connectuz.net/index.php?showtopic=777>). The Integrated Lesson project introduced many local students to the challenge HIV/AIDS; local officials continue to claim only one case of the disease in the country's history, while independent actors suggest the rate is high and rising rapidly. Students first researched the way the epidemic has affected African countries by visiting the websites of such organizations as the World Health Organization, Health Global Access Project, UNAIDS, and Medecins Sans Frontieres, and then created collages using their research and skills they gained from a GCE course on graphics editing. Participants in the forum agreed on the need for urgent, focused prevention efforts for at-risk groups, as well as a public awareness campaign to help encourage official transparency on the topic and break down discrimination against people infected with AIDS. Since October 2006, 78 students and 13 teachers from Turkmenistan have completed online projects with their American counterparts under GCE.

¶14. (U) Dushanbe minimize considered.

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